

## A HOUSE AND THE CITY

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The Debbané palace in Saida on the Lebanese coast was listed as a historical monument in 1968. Built in 1134/1721-22 as a palace for a local notable, a certain *Ali Agha Hammud*, it embodies the history of Lebanon over the last three centuries. The Debbané family bought it in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and restored it in the early 20<sup>th</sup>.



To protect this outstanding house the Debbané Foundation is hoping to establish a museum that would document the manifold aspects of urban life and architecture during the Ottoman period and act as a cultural centre for recording valuable information on the history of this house, Saida and the urban heritage of the region. It intends to heighten the presence, value, and viability of Lebanon's cultural heritage through the local history of the city, mainly during the Ottoman hegemony (1516-1918), a period that has been somewhat neglected largely due to the concentration on the Phoenician and Roman epochs. The museum would be the first initiative of its kind in both Saida and Lebanon. Its aims will be to help tourists and the local population to understand the Ottoman heritage of the Middle East <sup>1</sup>.

### The city

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Debbané palace was first built, Saida was the capital of the Ottoman province

1 The Qasr  
Debbané from south-  
east.

of the same name. Recent surveys have shown that the current city of Saida, with regard to its extant historical fabric, is principally an Ottoman city. Only a very few monuments, like the Land and Sea Castles and most probably the 'Umari' Mosque, date back to older periods. This is surprising in view of the fact that Saida was once an important Phoenician commercial city and saw the shift of various foreign rulers throughout different centuries. However, during almost two centuries (12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> ct.) of constant wars and sieges between the Crusader and Ayyubid / Mamluks armies, the cities in *Bilad al-Sham*, especially on the coast, were severely damaged and needed considerable reconstruction work. Whereas the Mamluks re-founded the city of Tripoli in 693/1293 Saida did not benefit from any major reconstruction effort on their part.

This, however, changed after the arrival of the Ottomans in 1516, and more particularly after the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. With the territorial expan-



sion of the Ottoman Empire, Saida was no longer located on the uncertain border of the empire, but became an Ottoman port city on the most important communication lines of the empire, namely the Mediterranean Sea. Saida was rebuilt and became the main harbour city of southern Syria, in what appears to have been a conscious effort to reinforce the eastern Mediterranean trade routes. Important figures of the Ottoman state, like Sokollu Mehmed Pasha (d. 1579), Grand Vizier from 1565 to 1579 and Küçük Ahmed Pasha invested considerable work in the city's reconstruction. The most impressive building of that time, the *Khan al-Franj*, was founded by the Sokollu Mehmed Pasha but is often erroneously attributed to Fakhr al-Din al-Ma'ni (1590-1635) and was first inaccurately known by the name *Khan Ibrahim Khan*.<sup>67</sup>

During the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century - when Fakhr al-Din made Saida his winter residence and when the Ottomans finally made Saida a provincial capital in the 1660's - the city boomed noticeably. Saida became the second most important town in southern *Bilad al-Sham* after Damascus. The Ottoman re-urbanisation of Saida is closely connected to its role as a harbour city and the foundation of a commercial infrastructure. All the known *khans* and arguably all the *sucs* date from Ottoman times and belong to the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. To mention but a few, there are the *Khan al-Franj* (1560 or 1574), the *Khan al-Ruzz* (Early 17<sup>th</sup> century), the *Qaysa/iriyya*?? (Early 17<sup>th</sup> century), the *Khan Dabbagh* (disappeared, Early 17<sup>th</sup> century), and the *Khan al-Qishla* (first known as *Khan al-Hummus*). The same Ali Agha Hammud family who built the *Debbané* palace in the same year built the latter in 1134/1721-22. The *khans* are located close to the harbour and emphasize this as the main reason for Saida's resurgence.

After the first wave of investment in commercial and public building, during the last decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and after the rule of Fakhr al-Din al-Ma'ni, the 18<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a strong input in the domestic urban development of Saida. Many houses, commercial buildings and bathhouses were constructed in the first half of this century. In this context, the *Debbané* palace deserves special attention. It was built as part of a *waqf* of the family of *Al Hammud*, one of the most powerful personalities of his time. The Hammud family seems to have settled in Saida at some point during the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. A certain *Katkhud Mustaf Hammud* already held quite a powerful position in Saida during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The *Khan al-Yard* and the *Kakhiya* Mosque were parts of his *waqf*. The Hammuds played a central role in the city during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century constructing several outstanding monuments. It is most likely that the father of Ali Agha, Mustafa Agha had ordered the addition of a new *madrassa* to the *Bahra* Mosque (1126/1713-14) and the construction of the *Hammam al-Jadad* in the same year. He held the position of *Tax Collector* for Saida - an important and lucrative position that remained in the family for many years.



The many estates of the Hammud family and the splendour of their houses seem to be a direct result of the legalization of the lifelong and hereditary right of tax collection by the Ottoman state in 1695. Thus also 'Ali Agah became the tax collector of the port of Saida in the early 1720's at the time when the Debbané palace was under construction. 'Ali Agha's son, Ahmad, followed his father's footsteps in office<sup>3</sup>. It was probably him who built the second Hammud house and the *Hammam al-Ward* in 1143/1730-31. It is interesting to observe that most of these buildings are located on a strip running north to south along the eastern edge of the old city. Since we have found no remains of a city wall in this area, it may be the city's expansion to the East. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Saida's importance began to recede and along with the city's splendour the fortunes of the Hammud family waned. In the 1770s, *Zahir al-'Umar* moved the administrative centre of the province of Saida to Acre, and under the rule of Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar (1775-1804) this change became irreversible. Also his successors, *Sulayman* Pasha and 'Abdallah Pasha were based in Acre until the rise of Beirut which began in the 1820s and especially in the 1830s under the Egyptian interregnum of Ibrahim Pasha (1831-1840). Ibrahim Pasha, son of the famous and independent "Ottoman Governor" of Cairo, Muhammad 'Al-Pasha (1805-1849), started in *Bilad al-Sham* with an ample programme of reforms similar to his father's policies in Egypt.

This period is marked by deep cuts in the established military power relations and economic administrative systems, and thus cut Saida off from the main trade routes. This means modernization evolved in other harbour cities and societies of the region. In the 1830's the first steamboats from Europe arrived in Beirut. Foreign trade with Europe intensified and - along with it - the cultural exchange between the East and the West. The history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Lebanon is closely connected with the dynamic growth of Beirut, while Saida became mainly an agricultural centre for the region. The shift from sea trade to overland and rural urban trade in Saida is expressed in the concentration of new commercial structures on the eastern landside of the old city, as for instance *Khan al-Shakriyya*, built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the context of global and regional economic developments, the shift to cash crop production created new opportunities and wealth for families that kept up with the developments. Among them were the Debbanés who had moved from Damascus to Saida in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and took over the old Hammud house as their residence at some point in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Based on their agricultural activities, the family flourished, spread out to major urban centres of the Levant like Alexandria and Beirut in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century and diversified its activities. Embedded in this regional and transnational network, the family's agricultural business continued to thrive throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



## The house

Today, the Debbané palace is situated in an area of still intense commercial activity. The house is not only located on the borderline between the modern city and the old town, but also structurally a

part of the historical *suq* area. It was, from its very beginnings, closely connected to the commercial life of Saida and the position of 'Ali Agha as Port Tax Collector. 69



2 Q a s r  
Debbané, entrance  
from the *suq*.

The house bears clear traces of the different periods of construction from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As far as we could establish, the house was built from scratch in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century when the eastern border of the city was being reshaped. A location where previously the city wall and the western border of the moat must have been. When it was built, the main thoroughfare of the *suq*, which constitutes the shortest connection between the two citadels in the north and south of the old city, was already in place. This, at least, is indicated by the fact that all other structures dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century take this street into account.

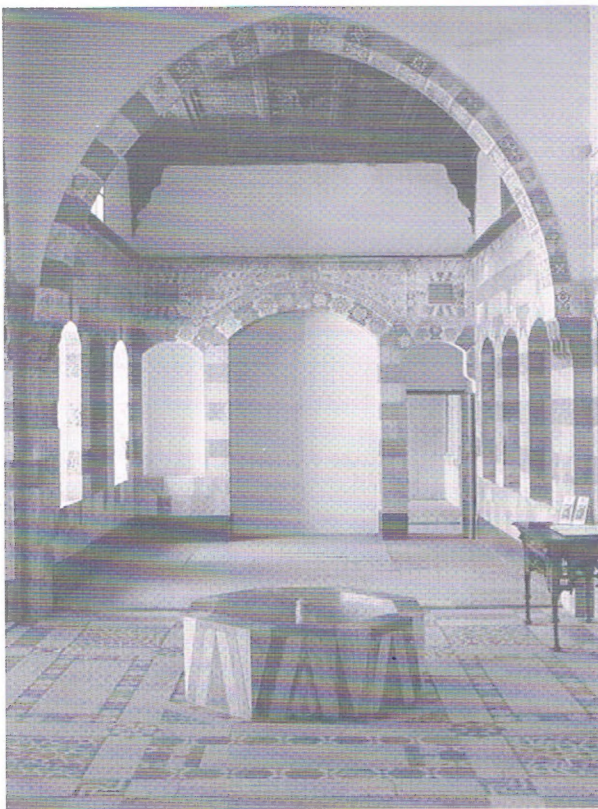
Some dubious historical narratives obfuscate the early history of the house. One has it that the house

was built for Fakhr al-Din and that the Italians were responsible for its decorative patterns. Others go even further by suggesting that a mediaeval defence tower was the origin of the present construction. But these are far-fetched ideas without sound historical or material evidence and should therefore not be given too much consideration.

Generally speaking, traditional houses in Middle Eastern cities are built around a courtyard situated on the ground floor. But unlike other cities of the Interior such as Aleppo, Damascus, or Hama, the coastal cities of *Bilad al-Sham* like Saida, Beirut, and Tripoli did not expand beyond the city walls until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Instead, these cities tended to grow vertically, and houses were often higher than those of cities like Aleppo and Damascus. Even when courtyards were built on ground level, many houses were constructed on top of large, vaulted substructures used as shops storerooms, *suqs* or workshops. This is the case with the Debbané palace, where the courtyard is located above the main *suq* of the city. Thus, residential functions could be spatially integrated into commercial areas and privacy was secured by setting these conflicting functions vertically apart. To enter the house, a visitor had to climb the narrow stairs behind a simple door that gives no indication of the luxury of the residence. When reaching the main hall and former courtyard of the house, the visitor would undoubtedly been impressed. The wealth of the owner was openly displayed on the walls and by the style of the house built according to the latest fashion. A closer look shows that here was a very ostentatious piece of architecture.



Of the remaining traces of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the reception hall (*qa'a*) was the most sumptuous part of the house representing a very bourgeois life style. It was here where the Agha received dignitaries of the town. In an ideal prototype house, the reception hall would have been located in the north, opposite the *'awan*, which in turn would have been to the south of the courtyard in order to be protected from the sun. This, however, is neither the case in the Debbané palace nor in the second palace of the Hammud family, the later *Madrasat Aisha*. In both palaces the *qa'a* is directly attached to the eastern side of the *awan* and orientated on parallel lines with the eastern border of the city, thus presenting its outer façade to the street running *extra muros*. The *qa'a* was intended to be an outstanding and eye-catching feature of the outer façade, emphasized by well-designed *abjaq* layers of stones in alternating colours. The protruding arm of the *qa'a* (*awan/tazar*) was the main section of the *qa'a* where the Agha was seated while receiving guests. The *qa'a* was meant to be seen, and everyone passing outside the city wall on his way along the coast between Acre and Beirut could not but notice that behind this façade a very important person held receptions.



3 The *qa'a* of the Qasr Debbané.

However, the main display of architectural decor was inside the house. Houses had a semi-public function and it was the duty of notables of the town to receive guests and supplicants, discuss business at home or be taken as an arbiter to assist in solving the daily worries of an urban society. People therefore must have known, at least by word of mouth, about the splendour of some residences. The *qa'a* built by 'Ali Agha must have been the talk of the town particularly since its layout and style of decoration was new to Saida and its surroundings before the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Agha most probably wanted to build and decorate the main rooms of his house according to the latest fashion and therefore employed craftsmen from Damascus, the main centre of social and political power during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in *Bilad al-Sham*. The workshop from Damascus seems to have participated in several building projects in Saida at this time, including building projects that were not sponsored by the Hammud family. However, the *qa'a* of 'Ali Agha is, to date, the earliest known example that follows the model of Damascus.

*Qa'as* of 18<sup>th</sup> century Damascus (like Aleppo) were much formalized in style and shape. On entering one first steps down into a lower part, the so-called *'ataba* (threshold) which often made up between one fifth or one third of the overall space of the *qa'a*. This part, usually paved with marble and equipped with a fountain in the centre, was the entrance area of the room. Bordering onto the *'ataba*, the second part of the room, the *tazar* rises like a platform of about 20 to 40 cm above the floor level of the *'ataba*. This was

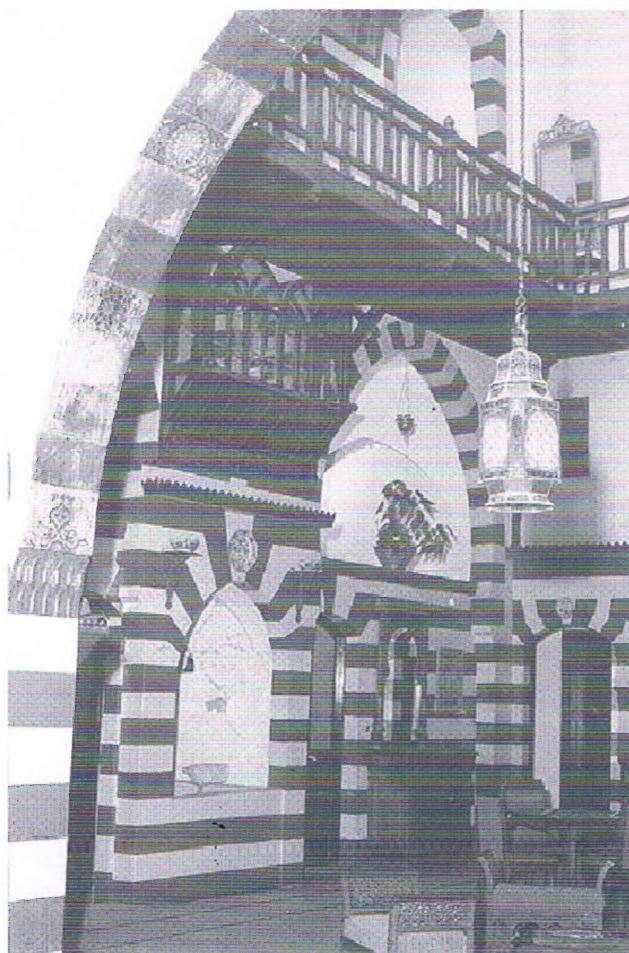


the sitting area where carpets covered the ground and seats (*diwan*) ran along the walls. Several niches offered storage space. These rooms were not meant to contain any furniture except diwans, boxes (*sunduq*), movable tables (*siniyya* with stands), or bowls for coal to heat in the winter (*manqal*). As the modernisation of domestic living space progressed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, European furniture became fashionable, and the '*ataba* / *tazar*' arrangement became an obvious hindrance. That is why, in the Debbané palace, like in many other houses, the *tazars* were later removed and all the floors given the same level.

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After the Debbané family purchased the house in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it continued to develop along with the family and with the city. The original 18<sup>th</sup> century layout of the house was altered by the incremental addition of further rooms on top of the existing house during the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and transformed in the 1920s when yet another upper storey and a tiled roof covering the originally open courtyard were added. In the course of this process, the functions of rooms changed, salons and dining rooms were introduced, and proper bathrooms added, reflecting the modernisation of domestic culture and changing patterns of daily life in the city of Saida. On the other hand, changes on the house also reflect functional changes in the city. Already around 1900, a row of vaulted shops was added to the eastern side of the house in an area originally outside the old walls, following and fostering the ongoing eastern expansion of the city and its commercial activities.

4 The central hall (ex courtyard) of the Qasr Debbané in 1968.



If the house was originally built in a style that was strongly and directly influenced by Damascene architecture being highly representative of its time, the point of reference and inspiration of upper class domestic culture in Saida shifted to Beirut around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The new houses that were built outside the old city to the east followed the fashionable *tiraz Bayrut*, the "Beiruti" style (i.e. a central-hall house with two or three storeys, large triple-arch windows in the main façade, and a red-tiled hip roof). Against that, and particularly in contrast to its next-door neighbour, the new red-tiled house of Abaza Pasha, the old Debbané house must have appeared rather patchwork-like and out-of-fashion. Finally, in the 1920s, it underwent a comprehensive refashioning, which meant not only the extension of the third floor and the addition of a red-tiled roof, but also the re-modelling of the existing structure into a more coherent whole. In the interior, this is very visible in the transformed courtyard. Real interior façades were created characterized by a rhythmically balanced composition of arches and openings and bichrome *ablaq* imi-

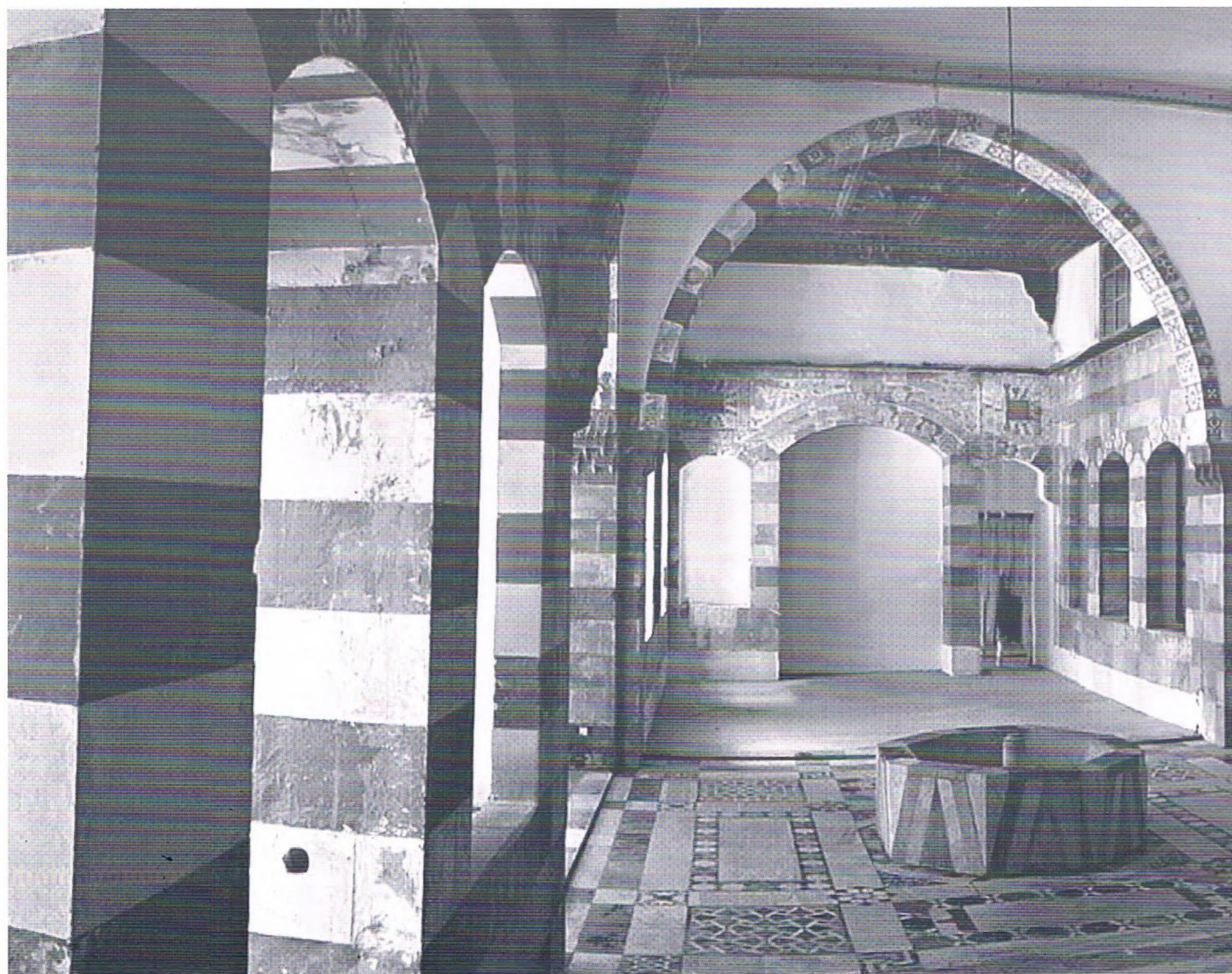


tation. Similarly, the exterior was homogenized with regular window openings on the third floor and an overall ochre plaster with white lining. Two towers with *tayyaras* flank a red-tiled hip roof atop an eye-catching clear-storey with long rows of elegantly arched and coloured windows. A particular effect is achieved by the location and design of the northern tower, which rises majestically above the open *suq* street below like a gate-tower, visible to every passer-by. In contrast to the rather hidden entrance of the house down in the *suq*, this tower expresses a new and much more extroverted way of representing social status in a dense urban context, typical of this period.

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5 The *qa'a* of the Qasr Debbané.

The house was refashioned in a style that might be called 'Orientalist eclecticism' and which particularly in the 1920s and 30s had important parallels throughout the cities of the Middle East, namely Cairo/Heliopolis, Damascus, Aleppo, and Beirut. The architect who drew the plans for the renovation was a Frenchman named Deschamps, also participated around the same time in the 1920s in a major urban renewal project. This took place in the new Rue Foch area of Beirut under the French Mandate and for which he designed buildings in a similar eclectic style<sup>41</sup>. Thus, by choosing this architect and his fashionable design, the house owner Raphaël Debbané





was as trend-setting in Saida, as his predecessor 'Ali Agha once was when he brought in craftsmen from Damascus to decorate his *qa'a*. Raphaël Debbané newly underlined the social status and economic success of his family with the renovated house, which was now a step ahead in comparison to the *tiraz Bayrut*, and his neighbours' houses in Saida.

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The Debbané palace, in its location, original structure and architecture as much as in its historical development and transformation, illustrates and epitomizes many different aspects of Saida's urban and social history from the 18<sup>th</sup> century until today. It is therefore a precious historical monument that deserves to be carefully restored and turned into a museum because it can contribute quite importantly to the better understanding of Lebanon's urban history.

6 The central hall  
(ex courtyard) of the  
Qasr Debbané in 1968  
(detail).





1 The Debbané Foundation is working in co-operation with the Urban Heritage project of the German Orient Institute in Beirut. An archaeological building survey of the house was carried out alongside an initial study on the city of Saida in 2002/04. Team included: Stefan Weber, Ralph Bodenstein and Beshr al-Barri. Marianne Boqvist joined us during our first campaigns.

2 See: A. Abdel Nour, 1982, *Introduction à l'histoire urbaine de la Syrie Ottomane (XVI- XVIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle)*. Beirut, p. 351; R. Deguilhem, "Le Khan des Français à Sidon: un waqf ottoman loué par la France", in: D. Panzac, 1995, *Histoire économique et sociale de l'Empire ottoman et de la Turquie (1326-1960)*, p. 138; M. H. Hilmi al-Rawwaz, 2003, *Tarikh Sayda al-'Uthmani*, Sayda, p. 161 ff. Ibrahim Khan (d. after 1031/1621-2) was the son of Sokollu Mehmed Pasha and Sultan Selim II's daughter Esmakhan Sultan (d. 993/1585). He served as *mutawalli* of his father's *waqfs*. This also identifies the Muhammad B/Pasha ibn Jamil al-Din Sinan and Ibrahim Khan of the famous *waqfiya* in Aleppo (Khan Kumruk *et al.*), cited by al-Ghazzi. Sokollu Mehmed's father, who was administrator of a *waqf* in Bosnia was called Jemal ül-Din Sinan Beg after he converted to Islam. Al-Ghazzi translated parts of the *waqfiya* in Aleppo (dated 982/1574) according to which "a new khan on the shore in the quarter of the sea in Saida" belonged to the *waqf* of Sokollu Mehmed Pasha. See: Kamil ibn Husain ibn Mustafa al-Bali al-Ghazza, *Kitab Nahr al-Dhahab fi Tarikh Halab*. 2 vols. Aleppo 1926, II 415 ff. The patronship of Sokollu Mehmed Pasha in Aleppo was already suggested by Jean-Claude David. We thank Stefan Knost for drawing our attention to al-Ghazzi.

3 For the Hammud family see: Archives Nationales (Paris) Affaires étrangères, B1, 1019- years 1712-15 to 1024- years 1736-39.

4 For Deschamps in Beirut, see M. Davie, 2001, *Beyrouth 1825-1975, un siècle et demi d'urbanisme*, Beirut, p. 76.